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ABSTRACT

A Valparaiso University (Indiana) computer network was used to investigate the use of campus electronic mail to encourage students in English-as-a-Second-Language reading and writing classes to increase communication among themselves, to make homework assignments more interesting, and to familiarize students with on-line composing and editing. Four types of activities used in the approach are described here. They include: (1) a vocabulary/idiomatic expression exchange, in which students are given an expression for which they must find and send a definition to everyone in the class including the teacher; (2) on-screen debate, in which two students discuss an issue on a split screen; (3) opinion collection, with each student sending an opinion to classmates and the class responding; and (4) an exercise in which students write a paragraph, reacting to a reading, movie, song, or controversial statement, for response by teacher or classmates. Samples of each are included. (MSE)

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E-mail in the Writing Class: Promoting Student Communication

Motivating students to practice their writing outside of class can be a daunting task. Using an on-campus e-mail system as an extension of the writing class can create interest not only in writing but also in communicating with other classmates. The interactive nature of e-mail lends itself to conversation-like exchanges without the high pressure of face-to-face contact. For students, this is an appealing opportunity for conversation at their own pace. It combines the immediate gratification of a phone call with the reflection of a letter.

At Interlink Language Center at Valparaiso University, a campus-wide computer system made e-mail accessible to all students and faculty. It struck me as a resource with fabulous potential for language learners so I began experimenting in my classes. It also seemed a good way to work CALL into the curriculum without a horrendous investment in software and equipment.

I focused on developing activities for my Reading/Writing classes. My goal was to make homework assignments more interesting and productive. I thought I could get students to put more effort into their homework by making it fun and creating a need to communicate through writing. I also wanted to decrease the paper exchange and increase the flow of information and ideas. Additionally, I wanted students to stop using the computer as a typewriter and get into the habit of composing and editing on-screen.

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It is not necessary to be an internet expert to use e-mail activities as part of your class. The activities outlined below are common classroom exercises which have been adapted for electronic communication. These activities were designed to be used by class members within the campus electronic mail system.

Recommendations at the outset

* It is difficult to anticipate all of the system's idiosyncracies, so test out your activities on other teachers before you spring them on your students.

* Take your students through the activity the first time in class. Go through the steps together to make sure everyone understands the terms, procedures, and objectives. Get students who are more proficient to help novices. After the basics have been mastered the activity can be used for homework assignments.

* Keep the activities simple and the purpose clear. Build in some kind of accountability. Avoid designing anything that depends on the presence and participation of every student--someone always forgets his password.

I have been using the following activities with success for nearly two years. They are the Vocabulary/Idiomatic Expression Exchange, On-Screen Debate, Opinion Collection, and Response Paragraph.

Vocabulary/Idiomatic Expression Exchange

This is essentially an information gap with vocabulary and definitions. On Monday each student is sent a word or expression. They must find and send a definition of the word and an example sentence to everyone in the class--including the teacher. Students collect and study the words for a quiz on Friday.

1. Students (ss) first need to make a distribution list (mailing list) of the class and the teacher (T). By doing this they can write a single message and send it to everyone.

2. T sends a message with instructions to the class distribution list.

3. T sends a different vocabulary word or idiomatic expression to each student.

4. Ss are responsible for finding out the meaning of their word/expression and how to use it. They are encouraged to consult their American roommates and friends. They send the word/expression, definitions, and examples to everyone in the class (including the T).

5. Ss collect and study the new words for a quiz at the end of the week.

The student messages are presented as they were written; I have not corrected spelling or grammar.
Sample Student message:

From: EXODUS::JMC1485
To: @cs4
Subj: HW

Okay! I will explain my idioms " get the ball rolling" meaning: It means start an activity or action; make a beginning; begin.

For example: George got the ball rolling at the party by telling a new joke. Is this meaning correct?

Take relax! Don't too hard! Have a wonderful weekend and holiday! Ken

On-Screen Debate

Two ss discuss an issue. This creates a need for functional language: asking for clarification, agreeing, disagreeing, and changing the subject.

By using the TALK feature of our on-campus system, two students can communicate simultaneously on a split screen. This worked best when done during class. I set a 5-10 minute time limit for each topic and had the students print the screens at the end of each discussion.

1. T sends out a message announcing the topics and partners.

2. Ss connect and exchange opinions on screen.

Sample Student discussion:

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(1) Hi Badar
(3) What do you think about television commercials?
(5) I think commercials will make children only want buy more things and parents become angry.
(7) Yes, but we are supposed to talk television comercials.
(10) Yes I read the articles. You don't have to say anything. They have to say all the things

TALK 3.3 (10)----------[Connection established]----------

(2) HELLO KUNIKO THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I TALK WITH SOMEONE ACTUALY A GIRL IN THE COMPUTER

(4) TELEVISON COMMERCIALS ARE OK BUT CHILDREN SHOULD NOT WATCH TOO MUCH.

(6) MAYBE SOME TV PROGRAMS MAKE PARENTS MORE ANGRY. DID YOU SEE POWER RANGERS?

(9) WAIT, DID YOU READ THE 2 ARTICLES SANDRA'S CLASS? I DIDN'T READ BECAUES YESTERDAY I WAS VERY TIER

Opinion Collection

Ss send out an opinion statement to their classmates and the class responds back. Two methods:

1) Ss try to keep the conversations going as long as they can by asking more questions and offering opinions and then report on the info in class

2) Ss collect the responses, write a summary, and send it to the T.

Sample student message:

From: EXODUS::RJO8698
To: MALLEN
Subj: homework

I asked my classmates if women should work. This is summary of ideas.

Three classmates said women can have job until married. But after married she should take care of children in home. Two classmates said women should work inside home. One classmate said women should work inside and outside home.

Response Paragraph

Students write a paragraph in reaction to a reading, movie, song, or controversial topic we have used in class.

Response to a controversial topic

1. The T or a student sends out a controversial statement.

2. Ss write a paragraph or two that outlines and supports their opinion on the issue.

3. Ss send paragraphs to the T; use for error correction in class. Or, ss send paragraphs to a classmate. Classmate responds to the other student's opinion and

forwards the message to the T and the first student.

Sample teacher message:

From: EXODUS::MALLEN "Marjorie Allen"
TO: @RW5
Subj: Your first assignment this morning

Good morning everyone.
Your first assignment today is to respond to this statement:

The lyrics of rock albums should be monitored. Albums whose lyrics contain violent or sexual messages and language should have warning labels. Children under 18 should not be allowed to purchase these albums.

Write one or two paragraphs that clearly state your opinion on this topic. Send your paragraphs to me at MALLEN.

Sample student message:

From: EXODUS::KHK0994
To: MALLEN
Subj: The lyrics of rock albums

Recently, rock music is very populer among teenagers, besides, rock albums are marking big purchases. But some adults are objecting music shop to sell teenagers those rock albums. Because they think that musician's lyrics usually contain violent or sexual messages, and language is not appropreate for teenagers. However, I do not agree with this opinion because musicians have rights to write lyrics that they want to mention us, and decision of purchase is free for everyone. Therfore, adults should not object with rock albums.

Even though, lyrics of rock music contain violent or sexual messages, teenager will not be influenced of those messages. They must know reallity and imagenation. they are likely to imitating rock musician's act, but which means not doing somethings like lyrics of rock music. Also, musicians have rights to write anything they want,

as I mentioned before. Their lyrics of music is an imagenation of another world. Moreover, prohibitation of teenager to buy rock alubums is wrong. Nobody can take teenagers interests away. That is awful thing to prohibit teenagers' purchase of rock albums.

Response to a reading, movie, or song

Ss write a one paragraph summary or respond to something they found interesting.

Send paragraphs to T.

Sample response to the movie "When Harry Met Sally."

From: EXODUS::HCT1016
To: MALLEN
Subj: When Harry Met Sally

In this film, Harry thinks men and women are impossible to be common friends. But Sally considers it is possible to have common boy firends. For Sally, she thinks sexaul behavior just exits between your closed boyfriend or girlfriend. But Harry thnks he can have sex life with some girls . And afther that, they will say good-bye. Basically, both of them have so different views about women and men's relationship. Sally is a moden girl. She has her dream for work. Originally, she just want to be common friend with Harry. Even they meet each other ten years later when Harry gets devoiced with his wife. But I think time will change people's views. Both of them will gets merried. Although they have different views about men and women's relationship, they have same interests, like seeing the same kinds of movies, going to musem. They can more realize each other's opinions with the time. If they gets married. They will still have some arguments because it is hard to change your original views

P.s. today, we have much homework to the first class and the second class.So I can not write more. Sorry

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Final Words

I have used these activities successfully with students from beginning to advanced levels of English. Student enthusiasm for e-mail assignments seems to be influenced by previous use of computers or the internet and whether or not they live on campus. Some students say they prefer doing their homework on e-mail. I had each group of students for eight weeks, and I cannot say I noticed a dramatic improvement in their writing within that time; however, one noticeable difference surfaced. Homework assignments done on e-mail were consistently longer than handwritten homework. Students seem less inclined to think of homework as drudgery when it is on e-mail.

E-mail assignments have created real need-based communication situations. Students have to deal with forgotten passwords and confusion with mail commands. They either get help from someone in the lab or call the computer center and explain the problem. Also, each class seems to develop a resident expert who helps teach the others the ins and outs of the system.